

Decision Notice

Rocky Mountain Front Wildlife Management Areas May 15 Opening At 12:00 Noon

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks
Region 4
4600 Giant Springs Road
Great Falls, MT 59405

March 21, 2007

Introduction

This decision notice addresses the impact of opening three Rocky Mountain Front Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs) at noon on May 15th each year. Those WMAs include Sun River, Ear Mountain and Blackleaf.

Each Wildlife Management Area, with the exception of Sun River WMA, is currently closed to public entry from December 1 to midnight, May 15 annually. This closure period provides quiet and secure winter ranges for big game species common to these WMA's. It encourages these species to use and reside on the Area, minimizing disturbance and depredation on adjacent private lands. These Areas provide significant winter forage for attendant wildlife species.

Prior to 1998 the public could enter any of these 3 WMA's at midnight on May 15th. As antler hunting became more popular, numbers of people seeking access to the Sun River WMA increased. In 1998 FWP made the decision to open the Sun River WMA at noon on May 15th in order to better control the growing numbers of antler hunters and to reduce potential accidents enhanced by darkness. Ear Mountain and Blackleaf WMA's retained their midnight opening hour.

In the past 10 years, numbers of the public accessing Blackleaf WMA at midnight May 15th have increased dramatically, mainly due to an increasing number of bull elk shedding antlers in the area during March and April. Black bear hunting season also begins on WMA's on May 15th

Ear Mountain and Blackleaf WMA's are integral components of FWP's spring livestock carcass redistribution program. In March and April each year livestock carcasses stockpiled from calving and winter losses are retrieved from local ranches with chronic grizzly depredation problems. Livestock carcasses from area ranches are randomly placed on Blackleaf and Ear Mountain WMA's, helping to reduce livestock depredations and human/bear interactions.

The Blackleaf and Ear Mountain WMA's are currently available for public entry at midnight on May 15th each year. This provides ample opportunity for human/bear interaction and raises safety concerns. Since livestock carcasses are randomly distributed throughout the area, the likelihood of an antler hunter encountering a bear in the dark is apparent. Livestock carcasses are generally fully utilized by bears during April, but remnant bone piles do exist and can be routinely checked out by bears into May.

The public process to consider this issue includes an Environmental analysis (EA) and public review pursuant to the Montana Environmental Policy Act.

Public Comment

A 33-day public comment period was established for the EA from February 15 – March 19, 2007. All comments received remain on file at the Great Falls FWP office and are available for public review. Public meetings were held in Choteau on February 26 and in Conrad on February 27. A total of six individuals attended the two meetings.

Written or oral comments were received from 12 individuals and 4 agencies. Of these, 9 favored the preferred alternative of the noon opener. Six individuals expressed interest in an 8:00 AM opening each year. One comment was non-committal.

Decision

Based on the information offered, I select the preferred alternative (B) of a 12:00 noon opening on May 15th for the Sun River, Ear Mountain and Blackleaf Wildlife Management Areas.

Rational For The Decision

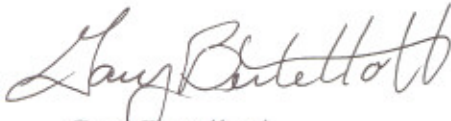
1. Most comments expressed support for the 12:00 noon opening for the Rocky Mountain Front WMAs.
2. Having a noon opener diminishes the potential for accidents involving horses, vehicles and people.
3. Having the public enter WMAs during daylight hours diminishes the potential for human-bear interactions.
4. Opening dates and times for the three WMAs will be consistent, resulting in less confusion by the public.

Finding Of No Significant Impact

Based on the analysis in the EA and consideration of public comment, FWP finds that further analysis with an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) is not required.

Conclusion

By this decision notice, the EA is hereby made the final EA. The finding of selection for Alternative B: Allow public entry to the three Rocky Mountain Front Wildlife Management Areas at 12:00 noon on May 15th each year is the product of this Decision Notice. This decision is in the best interest of the public, wildlife and wildlife habitat resources.



Gary Bertellotti
Regional Supervisor

3/23/2007

Date